

Atti del XV Convegno Annuale **AIUCD**

Digitale *e Public Engagement*

Pratiche e prospettive nelle Digital
Humanities

Cagliari 3-4-5 giugno 2026

a cura di

Cristina **Marras** | Andrea **Pergola** | Giampaolo **Salice**

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Associazione per l'Informatica Umanistica e la Cultura Digitale



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In Search of Lost Time: an Innovative Model for Representing Autograph Texts

GIULIA BALDELLI¹, DANIELE FUSI², MATTEO ZUPANCIC³, FRANZ FISCHER⁴, CLAUS ZITTEL⁵

¹STUTT GART UNIVERSITY, GERMANY – GIULIA.BALDELLI@ILW.UNI-STUTT GART.DE

²STUTT GART UNIVERSITY, GERMANY – DANIELE.FUSI@TS.UNI-STUTT GART.DE

³UNIVERSITÀ DI PISA, ITALY – MATTEO.ZUPANCIC@UNIFI.IT

⁴UNIVERSITÀ CA' FOSCARI VENEZIA, ITALY, FRANZ.FISCHER@UNIVE.IT

⁵UNIVERSITÀ CA' FOSCARI VENEZIA, ITALY, CLAUS.ZITTEL@UNIVE.IT

ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

This paper introduces the ongoing evolution of a novel digital model for representing and visualizing autograph texts in the context of genetic philology. Departing from traditional approaches that focus on comparing static versions extracted from an autograph sheet, this model shifts the focus from the effects (the texts) to the cause (the creative process itself). By leveraging a process-oriented, time-aware data structure, the model captures the dynamic flow of text creation and alteration, offering a more faithful and scalable representation of complex, annotated documents for scenarios like Goethe's *Venetian Epigrams*.

Keywords: digital scholarly editing; genetic editions; modelling; Goethe Venetian Epigrams.

ABSTRACT (ITALIANO)

Questo articolo presenta l'evoluzione di un nuovo modello digitale per la rappresentazione e la visualizzazione di testi autografi nel contesto della filologia genetica. Partendo dagli approcci tradizionali che si concentrano sul confronto di versioni statiche estratte da un documento autografo, il modello sposta l'attenzione dagli effetti (i testi) alla causa (il processo creativo stesso). Sfruttando una struttura dati orientata al processo e sensibile al tempo, il modello cattura il flusso dinamico della creazione e dell'alterazione del testo, offrendo una rappresentazione più fedele e scalabile di documenti complessi e annotati per scenari come gli Epigrammi Veneziani di Goethe.

Parole chiave: edizione scientifica digitale; filologia genetica; modellazione; Epigrammi veneziani di Goethe.

1. A CRITICAL DIGITAL EDITION OF GOETHE'S VENETIAN EPIGRAMS

In the spring of 1790, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe returned to Italy for the second time, arriving in the lagoon city of Venice. He lodged in a room overlooking the Canal Grande at the inn *All'insegna della Tromba*, where he was registered under the name Baron "Giovanni Gaeta" (also recorded as "Gassetta" or "Gajeta") from Saxony.¹ Going by this Italianized identity, Goethe spent nearly two months – from 31 March to 22 May – wandering the city's narrow streets, visiting its many artistic landmarks, observing its resonant and licentious urban life, and pursuing his emerging ambition to develop a morphology of animals. At the intersection of these impulses, and aided by the boredom induced by persistent rains that soaked the Venetian landscape, he began to jot down a series of brief poetic sketches. These would quickly grow into hundreds of compositions arranged in a series of handwritten notebooks which, chaotically yet progressively, took shape as the *Venetian Epigrams* (VE), conceived as a companion piece to the more famous *Roman Elegies*.

As Claus Zittel has observed in his 2023 article, the philological point of departure for the VE is remarkably unstable.² Despite an extensive and largely well-preserved manuscript tradition, the epigrams have not yet been edited in accordance with modern scholarly standards. This situation is primarily due to their complex history of composition and transmission, which is characterized by repeated interruptions and gaps in manuscript preservation. Further complicating matters is a dense interplay of self-censorship and external censorship, coupled with the fundamental impossibility of establishing a single authoritative version of the VE. The large number of textual witnesses, the fluctuating number of epigrams contained in each, and the abundance of variant readings render the reconstruction of their

¹ Oswald (2014), pp. 31-39.

² Zittel (2023), pp. 169.

genesis and transmission highly problematic. Ongoing processes of numbering and renumbering across manuscripts not only impede the systematic comparison of variants, but also generate unstable sequences that are difficult to reproduce adequately in print.

The manuscripts moreover exhibit multiple layers of revision: corrections, deletions, additions, marginal annotations, and alternative readings were introduced by several unknown hands at different times, using various writing instruments and inks. These interventions – ranging from punctuation changes and shifts in word order to parallel variants and distinct drafting stages – are often visible in the material record but cannot always be arranged into a clear chronological sequence.

The VE can therefore be understood not as a fixed text, but as a *textum mobile*. No single manuscript or print defines the work; rather, its textual identity emerges from the totality of its variants. The epigrams continuously reconfigure themselves across differing contexts and constellations. Their aesthetic identity is constituted precisely through variation, recombination, and contextual displacement, resulting in multiple, coexisting forms of textual identity. These identities are not the product of organic development, but of a combinatorial – and at times even aleatory – process. This necessitates a dynamic concept of the text and, concomitantly, a revision of the traditional notion of the “work,” which the protean and fluid nature of the VE fundamentally resists.

Against this backdrop, the project develops a digital scholarly edition capable of representing the VE not merely as a sequence of textual states, but as a network of textual movements, both diachronic and synchronic. The platform will make visible, for each epigram, its transformations across different stages, the pretexts on which it draws, and the new contexts it enters. The primary aim is to model the *textum mobile* in its full complexity and thereby to render the entire corpus more accessible for philological research. Methodologically, the digital edition will trace the movements and transformations of individual epigrams across their various configurations while simultaneously situating them within each respective arrangement. It will virtually reconstruct Goethe’s proposed organizational schemes at different stages and document, as far as possible, processes of revision. In addition, the edition will enable the formation of thematic groupings, the identification of recurring motifs, and the analysis of metrical patterns and correspondences.

In this way, the VEdition will provide readers, for the first time, with a platform to uncover the rich compositional history of a work that, despite its central position within Goethe’s corpus, has been deeply shaped both by the vividness of its content and by its markedly open-ended nature. Additionally, it will serve as a means of exploring new ways of conceiving the editorial presentation of a complex and multi-layered textual development, by preserving the meaningful autonomy of each individual text carrier and each specific textual version, without subsuming them under the hierarchy of a presumed “final version” that cannot, in fact, be established. The fluid, almost metamorphic quality of the interplay between the base layer and its array of alterations can also be visually observed through animations, thereby introducing a new and heuristically powerful tool for both hermeneutic inquiry and didactic practice.

2. DIGITAL MODEL

The representation of autograph texts — original manuscripts with complex layers of annotations representing variants of its text — poses significant challenges for digital philology. In many traditional digital approaches, the autograph document (here named carrier) serves as the material evidence from which multiple virtual versions are derived. These versions are of course abstractions, defined by interpreting the carrier’s content. Markup languages such as TEI are then used to connect them, marking deletions and additions relative to other versions — a process akin to “diffing” texts. This allows us to leverage existing critical edition practices to extract and compare multiple static versions from a document, using markup to annotate differences. We can then present text versions side to side, emphasizing their differences, and thus implicitly pointing at the creative process behind them. This is fit to methods and tools based on traditional text criticism, essentially based on comparing witnesses to build a reconstructed text, like comparing versions to hint at the transformation process which produced them.

While effective for many scenarios, this method might be less convenient with the high complexity and conceptual demands of deeply annotated documents like those of *Venetian Epigrams*, where literally dozens of alternative texts may coexist at the same level, reflecting an ongoing creative process rather than a finalized work. A systematic comparison and the consequent markup, connecting a big number of different versions where no one can claim to be the final one, would be rather difficult to scale. Moreover, the traditional approach still focuses on the *effects* of the underlying creative *process*, requiring the au-

dience to mentally reconstruct it from the differences surfaced on texts. The focus is on aligning versions and detailing differences to elucidate the process that generated them. Yet, the carrier with all its chaotic annotations is the witness of a creative process in the author's mind which progressively unfolded over time³; all the variants we derive and align are just its effects. The dynamic nature of this process is intrinsically difficult to fit into the presentation of multiple static texts.

In a digital edition, however, we can try to exploit time as our ally, instead of our enemy. The same time which accumulated all those changes on a text, making it a puzzle for scholarly interpretation, can be the solution to a more effective presentation of the creative process, reproducing a hypothesis about its reconstruction, unwinding versions one after another via animations.

So, the proposed model advocates a dramatic shift in focus: from the *texts* extracted from the carrier to the *process* that generated them. The carrier is seen not merely as a repository of texts, but as a witness to the creative process, with annotations serving as traces of the author's evolving intentions. A process being essentially a sequence of actions in time, a text making process is just represented as a sequence of editing operations (deleting, adding, replacing, moving, swapping) applied over time. Each operation produces a new version, and the accumulation of these operations constitutes the creative flow.

This implies that at this higher granularity level not all the outputs can be regarded as a self-contained text; they are rather steps along a transformation path. Only certain versions — those corresponding to significant alteration stages — are treated as waypoints along this path. This allows for the representation of multiple texts even in the absence of a final stage, with all stages coexisting as equally valid alternatives; and thus, it fits a scenario where a "constellation" of texts coexist on the same plane. There, the various text stages are like stars derived from the same nebula (the creative process), with the carrier acting as a telescope that captures the light (annotations) from the past, like in a photographic snapshot, thus allowing scholars to formulate a reconstructive hypothesis.

This shift from text outputs to the process generating them and reflected on the carrier requires us to define a new model, capable of composing many tensions: single vs. multiple documents (the carrier is materially one, but it virtually represents multiple versions of the text); objective vs. subjective layers (the carrier is the material evidence, while the reconstruction is subjective); and textual vs. graphical representations (as diplomatic data here is a foundational part of the reconstruction).

In this context, composing the first tension (single vs. multiple documents) was accomplished using a single data structure, termed "chain", capable of representing any number of text versions. The base text is modeled as a set of character nodes in a directed graph, linked one after another to build sequences. So, the chain includes a set of nodes, and a set of links, each tagged with the version it belongs to. With reference to the chain, editing operations just add new links (and possibly nodes, in case of insertions or replacements, which imply new characters), thus creating new versions without duplicating the entire text, while constantly increasing the items in those sets. For example, deleting a word involves creating a bypass link that skips the deleted portion, while adding or replacing text introduces new nodes and links. This approach ensures that all versions are efficiently represented within a single, compact structure defined via operations, which in turn are the essence of our process (Figure 1⁴).

³ When speaking of time, we are not implying a historical interpretation which orders one operation after another as it were going to reflect the real sequence of events occurred in the text making process. There is a tendency towards a historically plausible reconstruction, but the order within each alteration stage is just conventional. Time here is the focus of the model in the sense of being an additional feature of it, where information *accumulates* both on the graphical and on the textual layer. Every editing operation adds information for the next state of the text; so, in a sense, earlier states are those with fewer information, and later states are those with more. This has some resemblance with information theory applied to time in physics viewed as the 'cumulative record' of what happened.

⁴ Figure 1 shows 3 versions of a text: v0 "A red pen", v1 "A pen" (delete "red_"), v2 "A pencil" (insert "cil"). From left to right, just follow the version tag to compose the corresponding sequence of characters. Characters are nodes, linked by edges tagged with the corresponding version. Every version adds new edges, and possibly new nodes, to the chain, while nothing ever gets removed from the set. This accumulates more and more data as 'time' goes by, while preserving a compact model and representing each character with a single entity; just like on a manuscript the character once written stays there forever, and may become part of different sequences via annotations.

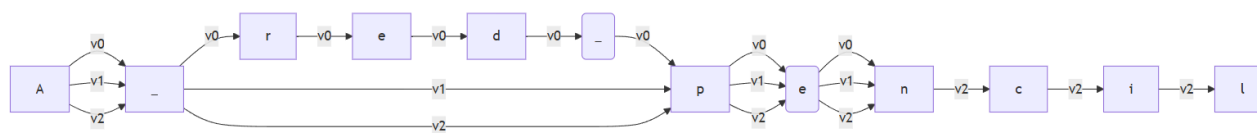


Figure 1. A chain sample

The same model also supports the annotation of both text and process through metadata linked to operations. So-called “features” — essentially name/value pairs⁵ — can be attached to nodes or output versions, enabling the documentation of reasons for changes (e.g., metrical adjustments, ink color, different hands) and other relevant information. So, the chain not only generates text, but also injects annotations into it.

This solves the tension between a single data structure and the multiple texts computed from it. At the same time, this architecture maintains a clear separation between the objective layer (the material carrier and its signs, which get a fully diplomatic representation) and the subjective layer (the interpreted creative process). The chain structure, fed by editing operations, generates all possible text versions and their annotations, preserving both layers for scholarly analysis.

As for the tension between textual and graphical data, the model covers both textual data (the generated texts) and graphical data (the visual appearance of signs on the carrier). Here, the original approach for graphical representation has evolved, recognizing the relevance of a more abstract and economical strategy. The original, graphical approach faithfully reproduces the facsimile image, literally re-drawing hints on top of it (via SVG), and positioning added text according to diplomatic metadata. Animations are employed to represent the temporal flow of operations. This method, while accurate, can be complex and time-consuming, unless driven by a more automated data flow for imaging.

To enhance efficiency, a new, symbolic approach has been introduced, abstracting the visualization process.⁶ Instead of redrawing each sign, operations are described using rendition features (like “diagonal line”, “box”, “cross”, “below and to the left”, “shifted right”, etc.), while the visualization engine uses this visual grammar to do the math to properly size and position each element.

To this end, all signs on a carrier are grouped into three categories: base text (the text laid out as first on the sheet, representing the starting point for its transformation), added text (e.g. an interlinear word replacing a word in the base text), and so-called “hints”, i.e. all the other signs whose purpose is to hint at the corresponding editing operation. This classification enables distinct rendering logic for each type, facilitating accurate digital visualization. For instance, say in a line of the base text the word “Wund:” (with colon) gets a diagonal stroke on it, while a smaller word “Wunder.” (with dot) is written below and to the left of it. The stroke here is the hint, representing the visual counterpart of a deletion, while the added text is the visual counterpart of an addition. Taken together, these two represent a replacement operation. In the symbolic model, this operation might have features like (from a controlled vocabulary) “hints=diagonal stroke”, “position=south-west”, “font-size=smaller”; the rendering engine will take care of picking the hint for diagonal stroke from a catalog of visuals, resize it to fit the word being deleted, position it over that word, and draw the added text with a smaller size at the position specified.⁷ The same catalog including the drawings representing hints, like lines or shapes, also links each hint to its designed animation for entering the visualization stage. This way, a single feature attached to an operation can pick the corresponding drawing from this catalog, and reuse it wherever needed, even across different projects, implicitly getting also the enter animation for it.

⁵ According to the semantic relevance of time in this model, features also include additional metadata in the dynamic flow where they get injected by operation, defining their behavior and lifetime in the process.

⁶ For reasons of economy here we can only provide an overview of this model. You can find more about it together with a demo of the hint designer at <https://vedph.github.io/gve-doc/model/diplomatic.html>.

⁷ It should also be added that side by side with those lower-level rendition features, which directly specify position, color, font size, and the like, this approach also allows for the definition of higher-level features, acting as a shortcut towards multiple lower-level counterparts. For instance, a number added to epigrams could be encoded with a single higher-level feature, like epigram-number, and later automatically translated into lower-level features like smaller number, a brown ink, rotated by about -45 degrees, at the top-left of the epigram, rather offset from it. This results in an even more abstract and thus more economic annotation strategy.

This allows for consistent, scalable rendering across projects, a more human-friendly description, and also detailed metadata about the graphical typologies used, which could later be used as search criteria or diplomatic data to feed machine learning-based computations.

Also, it should be emphasized that animation here, whatever the approach (graphical or symbolic), far from being a fancy presentational feature is crucial in the integration of time as a semantic dimension. Animations replay the sequence of editing operations, allowing users to witness the transformation of the text step by step. This dynamic visualization makes the creative process explicit, moving beyond static comparisons to reveal the flow of textual genesis.

By focusing on the process rather than static stages, the model embraces the flux of time and aligns more closely with the reality of text creation. Both textual and graphical elements (hints) accumulate over time, mirroring the irreversible nature of ink marks on paper in real world. There, once a sign is added — whether text or graphical — it remains forever, with subsequent operations building upon it: for instance, we may represent the deletion of a word by drawing a stroke on it; but the deleted word is still there. The digital model here mimics this reality, both for text and visuals: just like in the textual model (the chain) we have two sets of nodes and links which get added once and stay there forever, so in the visual model we accumulate signs on the display surface operation after operation. At the end, we fully match what is found in the carrier, while time — the fact that we added these signs one at a time, relating it to a specific editing operation — is represented by animations progressively revealing it and thus vividly presenting our reconstructive hypothesis. One of the best demonstrations of the intrinsically digital nature of such a dynamic, process-based edition is precisely the fact that there is no other way of showing its result than having it playing over time under the audience's eyes.⁸

This allows us to face the challenges posed by the peculiar scenario of *Venetian Epigrams*, while also trying to provide a model and a set of tools designed from the ground up for reuse in other projects. In fact, the whole data model, with its chain capable of dynamically generating annotated texts, its nodes and links, and the operations acting on them and representing the core of the reconstructed creative process, can be created by just using a web-based editor UI. Its data gets stored in a standard document database and can be easily dumped into a full textual encoding (based on JSON), as well as exported into TEI, RDF, etc. for purposes different from the highly interactive visualization illustrated above.

Even the visualization software required to provide its truly digital and native presentation, focused on progressively unveiling the making of a text, step after step over time, thus promoting a sequence of stills into a sort of historical movie, is part of a set of software tools designed for reuse in any third-party environment, from a static HTML page to any higher-level JS framework. To this end, these core components are packaged into open-source libraries and based on standard W3C technologies: for instance, while the backend chain-based logic can be available via REST API (distributed in Docker-based images), the frontend visualization is implemented by W3C web components, ready for integration and reuse with minimal effort. Even graphical assets, like the visuals catalog including hints and animations, not only can be shared across projects, but also edited via another web component designed right to support in their creation, based on a mixture of SVG and very small JS fragments leveraging a popular animation framework.

This also implies yet another engagement option for the audience: just like scholars working in this edition define their own reconstruction of the process, so that it can later be played before the user's eyes, the community itself could be involved in critically evaluating this work and even propose different reconstructions by leveraging the same tools used by the authors themselves. They would then see the result playing before them in real time and may later be integrated into the edition itself. This kind of flexibility and extension is precisely the purpose of a set of digital models and tools born to face the challenge of a specific work, but designed to provide also a scholarly paradigm and practical publishing system, thus fully embracing the flux of time, not only for the protean nature of such texts, but also for the ever-changing assets of digital editions.

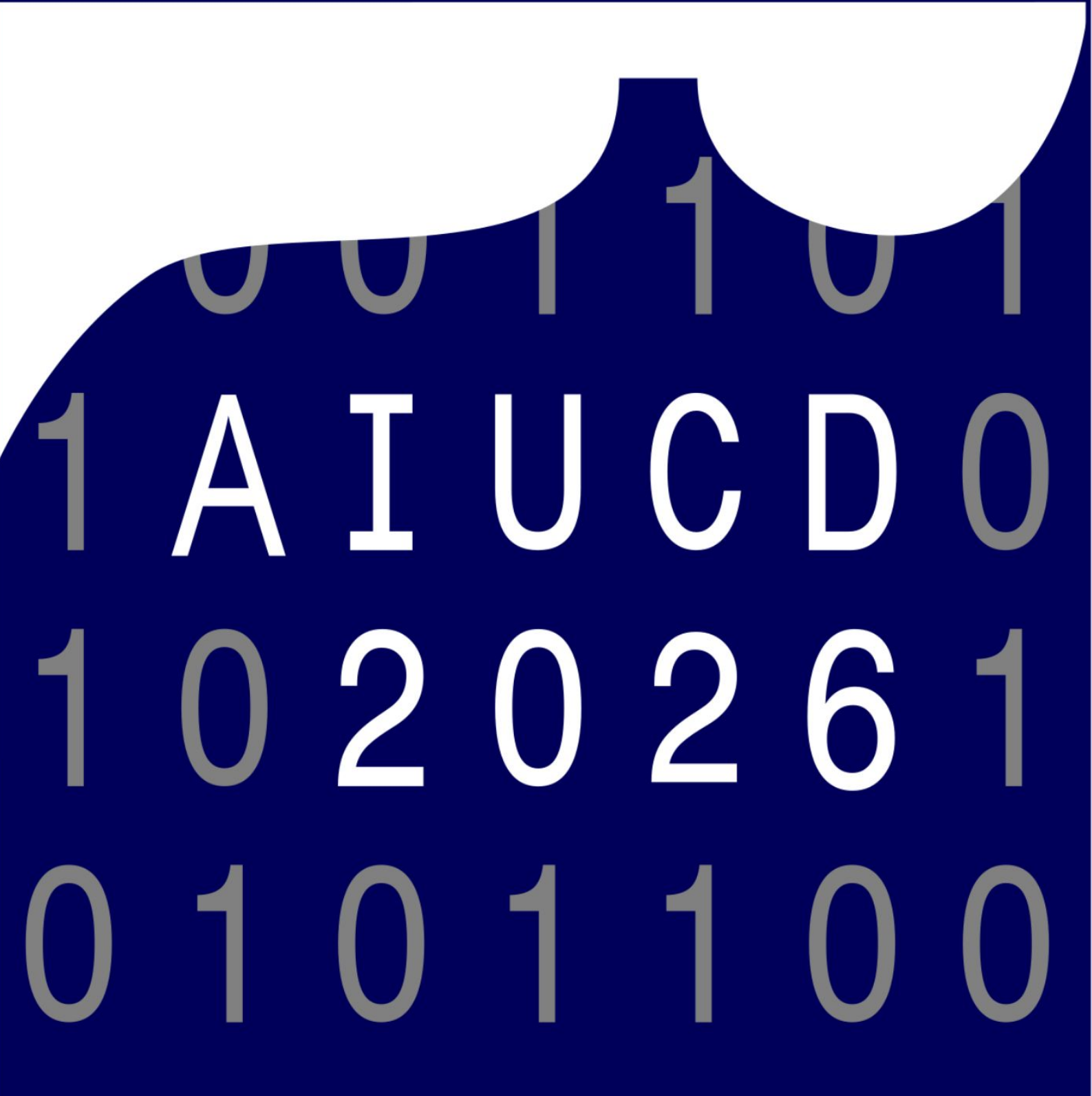
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⁸ See e.g. the demo at <https://gve-rendition.surge.sh/?sample=h5-48> (the play button starts the show).

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